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Docent Dispatch

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Visiting the Ford Mansion in Morristown, NJ; Physical Privacy in Colonial Wartime America

by Pat Van Haste

A visit to northwestern New Jersey would not be complete without touring the Ford Mansion, George Washington's military headquarters during the winter wartime years of 1779-80. The Mansion is one of the earliest house museums in the country. A highlight of the tour is a discussion about the colonial concept of physical privacy, a practice reserved for the gentry only.

The Ford Mansion, built in 1774, was a gift from his father to Col. Jakob Ford Jr., offspring of a wealthy iron forge owning area family; his wife, Theodosia Johnes Ford and their 4 children. Theodosia was the daughter of a minister, and was said to be a bit uncomfortable with the size and ostentatiousness of the house. With the house came 200 acres of land. Col. Ford was a patriot and offered his home as housing for 35 colonial troops during the winter encampment years of 1776-77. While quartering those troops, Jacob Ford died, leaving his widow to supervise his business interests, care for their children, and tend to the needs of the troops. Two years later, during the winter of 1779-80, one of the worst winter seasons in recorded history, George Washington called on the Ford family for shelter for himself, his wife,



Ford Mansion, in Morristown, NJ. Photo from www.mountevernon.org

staff and servants. Joining them at one point was the Marquis de Lafayette. Washington's military "family" occupied most of the house. Colonial Army regulars settled in Jockey Hollow, about 5 miles south, in huts they built themselves. From the Ford Mansion, Washington kept his eye on the British quartered for the winter in New York City and lobbied Congress for aid for the troops.

The house, like Carlyle House, was built with a main center hall, and symmetrical rooms on both sides. The same is true of the upstairs bedrooms area. There is a servants' section on the far eastern end of the clapboard-sided house, with a large kitchen and pantry. It had its own central hall, where the servants slept, all on the main floor. Due to the area's climate, the kitchen was inside the house and featured a huge fireplace used not only for cooking but also for

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warmth.

With so many people living in the house, physical privacy was a challenge, and so ways to find some became of great importance. In gentry homes in the late eighteenth century, the concept of physical privacy developed in different ways. No longer would well-to-do families eat from a communal bowl; the Fords had glasses, eating utensils and plates for everyone. Houses were built with public spaces for entertaining as well as private spaces such as libraries and bedchambers. Mrs. Ford and her children lived and slept within the dining room and one back room. General and Mrs. Washington took over the master bedroom, where bed hangings not only gave warmth but also privacy. The General and his staff met and worked between the parlor, the library and the office/study. The staff shared sleeping accommodations upstairs. Camp beds were important, as the enclosure around the camp bed provided not only warmth but less light and noise to aid sleeping. Army regulars, however, had nothing more than sleeping shelves built into the huts constructed in Jockey Hollow.

After the war, members of the Ford

Family continued to occupy the house through the 1870's. Eventually the National Park Service took over the property and it is presented today as closely as possible to how it appeared during Washington's tenure. Rooms cannot be entered by the general public. All rooms are viewed only from the central hallways only.

A visit to the Ford Mansion is well worth the time. It is an excellent example of a home built by a wealthy Colonial patriot, in a similar style to Carlyle House, but in a different climate. Privacy to the colonists was of even more importance in a situation like the Fords and their guests endured, where the future of the American colonies rested on the relative comfort of those housed in the home. Rest, warmth and physical privacy in that awful winter were hard to find for the commanders, their host and their troops. Bed hangings, camp beds, dedicated eating utensils, all contributed to giving some sense of physical privacy to those who badly needed it during very challenging times.



Washington's Office. Image from the Washington Association of New Jersey